

**HEARING BEFORE
THE UNITED STATES HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COUNTERTERRORISM, LAW ENFORCEMENT, AND
INTELLIGENCE**

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Testimony of Simone A. Ledeen
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East

I. Introduction

Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Simone Ledeen. I am currently a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Krach Institute for Tech Diplomacy, a bipartisan initiative affiliated with Purdue University, and Managing Director at Vantage ROI. I previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for the Middle East. Prior to that I was Principal Director and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism, where I was responsible for defense policy on counterterrorism activities, as well as military information support operations, irregular warfare, direct action, sensitive special operations, and personnel recovery/hostage issues.

Like many others, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, I felt moved to serve our country. A family friend was on American Airlines Flight 77, which was hijacked by al Qaida operatives and crashed into the Pentagon. I served in Iraq from 2003–2004, and then in Afghanistan in 2005. In Afghanistan, I served alongside the military in a non-combat role, deploying there for most of 2005 and again from 2009–2010 as the Senior Treasury Representative to NATO’s International Security Assistance Force. Both of my brothers served in the Marine Corps—one in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan.

II. Experience with the Withdrawal from Afghanistan

My experience with the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan unfolded from my own home when I began receiving real-time requests for assistance from people on the ground in Afghanistan. The stories of chaos that I was hearing did not align with the picture that the U.S. government was trying to publicly paint about the withdrawal.

On August 19, 2021, a dear friend contacted me. She was looking to help an Afghan family trapped outside the Kabul airport. The father had served as an interpreter with our Special Forces. He was outside the airport at the northwest gate with two kids and an injured, pregnant wife. Upon learning this, I immediately reached out to people in my network who I thought might know what to do. I was invited to join a group chat that included active and retired military members and individuals with experience in the intelligence community. Without introduction, everyone in the chat started sharing information, which allowed us to piece bits of information together that we individually received to form a more robust picture of the reality on the ground, and help vetted, qualified people safely exit the country.

It was a spontaneous volunteer effort, the scope of which we did not initially comprehend. Our strategy from the outset was to find ways for at-risk individuals who had the appropriate documentation, and in some cases were known by members of our group, to gain entry with the assistance of U.S. service members who manned the gates and fences at the airport. This was challenging since there were thousands of people crowding the airport perimeter. We had group members who were communicating with teams on the ground. We also had (over time) telephone numbers for individual Marines. Once a service member made physical contact with an at-risk group and moved them inside, we focused on ensuring that they were manifested on a flight to a safe destination.

Over time we helped more and more people—American citizens, legal permanent residents, interpreters, intelligence assets, and some Afghan Commandos—leave. Yet, as the messages rolled in, I had to wonder—where was the U.S. government? The urgent, time-sensitive information we sent to the State Department did not receive a response. The U.S. government did not seem to have a full accounting of the number of people that needed to leave. How did we get to the point where volunteers in a group chat were offering more resources and support to evacuees than our own government?

More than ever, I believe the deaths of our 13 servicemembers, in addition to catastrophic injuries sustained by the dozens of young men and women at Abbey Gate, were avoidable and should never have happened. Our government's failure to secure the safety of our own citizens and those who risked their lives for us led to the most disgraceful and shameful national security crisis in our lifetime. To this date, nobody has been held accountable.

III. Observations About the Chaotic Withdrawal

Based on our group's involvement in the evacuation and related activities, I have some insights into the chaotic withdrawal that are likely shared by others who were involved in these efforts. Today, I'd like to give a few examples, which demonstrate that, after twenty years of fighting, everything quickly collapsed despite nearly fifteen years of withdrawal planning across three administrations. Fundamentally, the prior plans did not anticipate an arbitrarily imposed troop cap that negated our ability to make use of Bagram Air Base. This made previous plans obsolete, and it appeared our military planners had to start from scratch at the eleventh hour with impossible restrictions. This led to a number of issues:

- As we tried to help people flee, we could not identify who was running the airport. We were contacted by many groups, including civilian volunteers, NGOs, universities, and corporate entities who had planes either on the ground or enroute to assist in evacuating people. However, these planes could not get in contact with anyone from the U.S. or any government on the airfield, nor could their passengers access the gate. For example, one group was trying to reach a Ukrainian plane that had been sitting on the tarmac for several days. The group reported that the plane was for the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (SOF), who had been waiting at the gate, but the soldiers said that nobody would let them in, even though they were manifested on the plane. This was the first of many times we would hear of groups that were manifested on flights not being able to access the airport. Until the final days, many chartered planes that were able to land in Kabul left nearly empty because the people who needed to leave on them could not get inside

the airport. Outside the airport gates, the area was not secured for Americans waiting to enter and the U.S. failed to create an organized process to identify individuals who should have been permitted entry. For example, members of our group organized night operations for American citizens to climb ladders to leap over airport fences. To further complicate the situation, the U.S.'s abandonment of Bagram Air Base meant that there was no air traffic control in place other than for military planes.

- On August 17, the U.S. government instructed American citizens in Afghanistan to shelter in place and not attempt to access the airport.¹ With this instruction, the U.S. government was telling its own citizens to hide. In the group chat, we recognized that this was because the Taliban—the force that the United States had been fighting for 20 years—controlled entry to the city and to the airport itself. The Taliban had started targeting those waiting to enter the airport, beating people, and burning their documents, which they needed to depart the country. So when the State Department stated that the airport was secure, we knew this was wrong.² If the airport was safe, why did the U.S. government tell American citizens to hide?
- The Taliban quickly took back control and began exercising their power. Videos circulated in our chat showed the Taliban firing weapons outside of the airport. Wounded civilians could be seen lying on the ground and covered in blood. These videos were filmed by the people we were attempting to help escape. At one point, we were alerted that there was an American family with a sign that said, “we are all here.” They were stranded outside Abbey Gate. Our teammates rallied cars to pick them up, but the family got spooked by the Taliban and went back to their residence. An image of the Taliban’s Iwo Jima reenactment with them kitted up in American gear also surfaced, which enraged us.³
- The State Department also instructed at-risk Americans to go to the Ministry of Interior Headquarters in Kabul on August 21. Later, the Taliban seized 20 of these U.S. citizens’ passports and held their owners hostage, though these Americans were eventually recovered.⁴ The following night, the State Department scheduled another pickup at the Ministry of Interior, with U.S. military personnel ready to meet and escort the Americans to the Kabul Airport. These efforts continued for several days, but required U.S. citizens and their families to clear a Taliban checkpoint where they were harassed and sometimes beaten, contrary to the terms agreed to by our government. There were no repercussions for this violation and humiliation of our citizens. Further, U.S. citizens’ spouses and minor children were permitted to depart via this method, but not their extended family. Our citizens were forced to decide whether to leave and effectively abandon parents and

¹ Adam Shaw, *State Dept tells Americans in Afghanistan to 'shelter in place' until they hear from embassy*, FOX NEWS (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/state-dept-americans-afghanistan-shelter-in-place>.

² Ned Price, *State Dep't. Press Briefing*, U.S. DEP'T OF STATE (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-august-17-2021/>.

³ Jon Simkins, *Taliban photo appears to mock Iwo Jima flag raising in latest propaganda push*, MARINE CORPS TIMES (Aug. 21, 2021), <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/off-duty/military-culture/2021/08/21/taliban-photo-appears-to-mock-iwo-jima-flag-raising-in-latest-propaganda-push/>.

⁴ Hollie McKay, *Taliban seizing Afghan-American's US passports outside Kabul airport*, N.Y. POST (Aug. 20, 2021), <https://nypost.com/2021/08/20/taliban-seizing-afghan-americans-us-passports-outside-airport/>.

adult children or stay and face the new Taliban way of life. In addition, we know of multiple legal permanent residents who should have been evacuated, but were turned away by the Taliban because they did not possess the blue U.S. passport.

- On August 23, as our team faced immense challenges assisting U.S. citizens and high-risk Afghans who needed to gain access to the airport, we continued to press forward. For every one group that made it through, it seemed like ten did not. Among those we were helping that day was an Afghan woman who had worked with U.S. intelligence on a clandestine platform. With the assistance of a Marine who ran across the airport to find her, she and her family waded through a canal of human waste to get inside the airport and are safe today, far away from Afghanistan. We shared photos of “our” families as they boarded flights.
- On August 24, U.S. officials on the ground announced they would no longer accept Afghan locals and issued a final call for American citizens to report to the airport. We learned later that a deal was made with the Taliban to expedite withdrawal by August 31st. The White House claimed they had contacted all American citizens, but many Americans we were trying to help had never heard from anyone from our government. As the State Department screened individuals at the airport, they began turning away some Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipients and high-risk Afghans. Once they were sent back outside the airport, they faced certain death.
- On August 25, the team managed to rescue 25 interpreters and former contract employees of a U.S. intelligence agency, including a double amputee who walked to Kabul with his family. That day, our group also supported the evacuation of high-risk Afghans who had assisted the FBI and the U.S. Treasury Department. We received reports from several American citizens and high-risk Afghans who struggled to reach the airport due to Taliban checkpoints, as well as conflicting information from the U.S. government. Some families, including U.S. citizens, were beaten by the Taliban while attempting to enter the airport. That evening, 11 buses filled with American citizens and high-risk Afghans could not gain entry to the airport, and an urgent security alert advised U.S. citizens to avoid the airport gates.⁵ Despite multiple efforts to contact relevant authorities, American citizens were left stranded outside the closed gates, with some eventually gaining access only after intervention from higher-level officials. Many of the high-risk Afghans were denied entry, and to my knowledge never made it out.
- With imminent threats reported at multiple gates, a suicide bomber attacked Abbey Gate, resulting in 13 Americans killed and dozens grievously wounded.⁶ Over a hundred Afghans were murdered, including the young son of one of the interpreters we had been trying to assist. As gates were being sealed shut, requests for help continued to pour in for 300 orphans and other large convoys, including music school students, and religious and ethnic minorities who had all been left stranded after the blast. Although we were

⁵ *Security Alert*, U.S. Embassy Kabul (Aug. 25, 2021), <https://af.usembassy.gov/security-alert-embassy-kabul-afghanistan-august-25-2021/>.

⁶ Matthieu Aikins, et al., *Suicide Bombers in Kabul Kill Dozens, Including 13 U.S. Troops*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 26, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/26/world/asia/kabul-airport-bombing.html>.

distraught and angry, our team of volunteers continued working to find alternative ways to evacuate people.

- Cleared data-science professionals within our group created and refined a tool we used to deconflict manifests and track who was leaving and where they went. As days passed, they met with leaders at U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) who were so impressed with this tool that they integrated it into their own efforts. By the evacuation's conclusion, we had tracked 7,000 evacuees through our own efforts—including 1,600 American citizens and 3,000 SIVs—and over 41,000 in partnership with SOCOM. While these figures certainly do not cover everyone who left, including on flights organized by other countries, our data suggest that the Administration's estimate of the number of evacuees who departed via the airport—124,000—is likely inaccurate and overstates the total number of evacuees.⁷
- There are many examples of quiet but Herculean effort in those final days—Afghans left behind who were still working to properly dispose of some of the most sensitive data that remained with our Afghan contractors. Many databases with millions of records nearly got left behind, but for the incredible risks by a few noble warriors who saved both themselves and the data they smuggled out.
- Intelligence tools had been removed too quickly and too completely from Afghanistan. Following the catastrophic deaths of the 13 service members during the withdrawal, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) executed a strike based on bad intelligence that resulted in civilian deaths. Chairman Mark Milley defended the strike, calling it “righteous.”⁸ But CENTCOM had pulled all of its intelligence collection tools out of Afghanistan already and incredibly said they were relying on the Taliban—a force we had been fighting for 20 years—for force protection.
- Even basic essentials like food and water were forgotten. The situation outside the airport grew so desperate that inbound aircraft were asked to bring food and water into the country.
- It was only after the Taliban had captured Kabul and Americans were taken hostage that President Biden finally addressed the situation.⁹

IV. Resurgence of Terrorism

The Taliban wasted no time in asserting its power, and retribution was swift. The Talibs placed a high price on our Afghan partners' heads. Through various means, they quickly identified who

⁷ *U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan* at 5, THE WHITE HOUSE (Apr. 6, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁸ Alex Horton, et al., *Botched drone strike that killed 10 civilians in Kabul was not a result of criminal negligence, Pentagon says*, WASH. POST (Nov. 3, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/11/03/kabul-drone-strike-inspector-general-report/>.

⁹ Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, THE WHITE HOUSE (Aug. 31, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

had been working with U.S. and hunted those individuals down—going house to house to find them.¹⁰ On our watch, they became the most well-armed terrorist group the world has ever seen. I speak on behalf of many when I say we cannot forget our Afghan allies who did not make it out of Afghanistan during the withdrawal. They live in constant fear that the Taliban will harm them or their families. Some have escaped to Pakistan, Iran, and other countries, and have been recruited by their militaries and intelligence agencies. They have been forced to teach our tactics and methods to our enemies. Some may even be fighting for the Russians in Ukraine.¹¹

To give you a sense for who is leading the Taliban today, four of the five ex-Guantanamo Bay detainees exchanged for Bowe Bergdahl in 2014 have senior positions in the Taliban's resurrected Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.¹² The Minister of Interior is Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is very close with al Qaida.¹³ Haqqani has planned multiple operations that have resulted in the deaths of American soldiers and civilians. He is wanted by the U.S. and there is a \$10 million bounty on his head.

ISIS-Khorasan has also regained immense strength. Prior to the withdrawal, the U.S. had crushed ISIS-Khorasan and imprisoned its few surviving members in the Pol-e-Charkhi prison. After the collapse of the Afghan government, in one of their first acts, the Taliban released those terrorist prisoners.¹⁴ I'm not the only one ringing the alarm bell on the reemergence of the threat ISIS-Khorasan once again poses. CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla recently testified that ISIS-Khorasan would be able to launch attacks against western interests outside of Afghanistan in less than six months with little to no warning.¹⁵ Yet, our political leaders have remained silent, seemingly ignoring the resurgence of ISIS-Khorasan and our inability to combat this threat now that we have abandoned our allies and have no persistent intelligence collection capabilities there or in neighboring countries since the withdrawal. Afghanistan has become an ISIS-Khorasan playground. Apparently, we have not learned the lesson that what happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan.

While the withdrawal has turned Afghanistan back into a terrorist breeding ground, arguably on track to exceed its pre-September 11 status, we must be mindful of terrorists who have already entered our country. In fiscal year 2022, 98 people on our terrorist watch list crossed over our

¹⁰ Tyler O'Neil and Teny Sahakian, *Taliban commit 'house-to-house executions' in Kabul after US exit as chilling audio demonstrates Afghans' fear*, FOX NEWS (Aug. 31, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/world/taliban-kabul-executions-afghanistan-gunshots-audio>.

¹¹ Zheela Noori and Najib Ahmadyar, *Former US-Trained Afghan Commandos Recruited by Russia, Iran*, VOICE OF AM. (Nov. 7, 2022), <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-us-trained-afghan-commandos-recruited-by-russia-iran-/6821028.html>.

¹² Samuel Chamberlain, *Four Taliban members swapped for Bowe Bergdahl now in Afghan government*, N.Y. POST (Sept. 7, 2021), <https://nypost.com/2021/09/07/four-taliban-members-swapped-for-bowe-bergdahl-now-in-afghan-government/>.

¹³ Peter Bergen, *He's on the FBI's most-wanted list and is now a key member of the Taliban's new government*, CNN (Sept. 9, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/09/opinions/haqqani-taliban-government-afghanistan-bergen/index.html>.

¹⁴ Kelly Laco, *Pentagon says 'thousands' of ISIS-K prisoners released by Taliban*, FOX NEWS (Aug. 27, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/pentagon-thousands-isis-prisoners-released-taliban>.

¹⁵ See Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla, *Statement for the Record Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of US Central Command* at 3, 10 (Mar. 13, 2023), <https://af.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-kabul-afghanistan-august-28-2021/>.

southern border that we know of.¹⁶ With unprecedented overland immigration, many individuals have been entering the country on foot and avoiding detection. This is a concerning development. In the initial airlifts out of Kabul, U.S. government officials did not properly vet all the Afghans who were evacuated. A Department of Defense whistleblower has alleged that 324 individuals evacuated from Afghanistan were allowed to enter the U.S. despite appearing on the Defense Department's Biometrically Enabled Watchlist (BEWL).¹⁷ This, while thousands of vetted Afghans remained trapped and unable to evacuate. Indeed, there are many videos circulating online and elsewhere of torture and murder of our Afghan allies since August 2021. In addition to these horrific and violent acts, this situation has caused deep and continuing moral injury to our veterans and civilians who served.

V. Accountability and Recommendations

Our warfighters voluntarily went into harm's way to keep our country safe. Many are alive today because of individual Afghans who sacrificed for them. Today, our institutional leaders act as if the war and our withdrawal didn't happen, and we are just meant to move on. Many veterans cannot move on without accountability. We must hold those responsible for the failed Afghanistan withdrawal accountable for their decisions. While the withdrawal (and timing) was fundamentally a policy decision made by the Commander in Chief, military leaders and senior government officials across multiple administrations' departments and agencies need to tell our nation the truth about what led to the chaos, rather than continue to rely on career-preserving talking points.

Moreover, when the U.S. government supported the Afghan civilian leadership, the civilian leaders not only enriched themselves but they also funded the Taliban through bribes, contracts with front companies and subcontractors and ransom payments.¹⁸ With few exceptions, the U.S. government looked the other way. We knew this for a decade and although changes were made to vetting contractors and subcontractors, this situation continued. For a long time, politicians and military leaders also issued glowing statements about the progress the Afghan National Security Forces were making, which were at odds with the intelligence assessments produced at the same time. It is not too late for the long-needed reckoning to make sure this never happens again.

Many veterans and civilians who have served have gotten involved in resettlement to help address the moral injury they have sustained. Our government can help with this:

1. The government should consider establishing a mechanism for direct verification of SIVs that worked under classified contracts. Over two years have passed and this is still not in place. The government should create a mechanism for DoD to communicate directly with the State Department to verify Afghan employment under classified contracts. The

¹⁶ Anna Giaritelli, *Nearly 100 FBI terror watchlist suspects nabbed at southern border*, WASH. EXAMINER (Oct. 25, 2022), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/nearly-100-fbi-terror-watch-list-suspects-caught-southern-border>.

¹⁷ Alayna Treene, *Scoop: Pentagon watchdog to open review into Afghanistan whistleblower claims*, AXIOS (Sep. 8, 2022), <https://www.axios.com/2022/09/08/defense-department-inspector-general-afghanistan-withdrawal>.

¹⁸ U.S. Special Inspector Gen. for Afg. Reconstruction, *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 16-58-LL (Sept. 2016), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-16-58-LL.pdf>

entire system for employment verification (the entire basis for visa approval) is left to civilian contractors, many of whom dissolved in the lead-up to August 2021 and no longer exist. The Department of Defense has not been held accountable for the local nationals contracted under their employment who continue to bounce between safe houses if they have not fled to third countries.

2. Consider authorizing SIV eligibility for Afghans who were injured while serving the USG before their one year of service eligibility. Currently, the Afghan Allies Protection Act is rigid in the time of service required to be eligible for an SIV.¹⁹ The result is that an Afghan could have dutifully served for 340 days and have been traumatically injured in combat alongside his American compatriots, but he is ineligible for an SIV because he is a month short of the requirement.
3. We must take care of our veterans. The withdrawal was an emotional time for many of our veterans, who careened back and forth between grief and rage. To many, it has seemed like America does not care about the sacrifices they made on their behalf. The ballooning mental health crisis among the veteran population speaks to this devastation. This chaotic withdrawal has significantly added to our military's current recruitment problem. Some veterans I know, all of whom come from military families, have stopped encouraging or are even preventing family members from signing up. Many veterans have been involved in the resettlement process with Afghans to help address the moral injury the veterans have sustained. Our government has the resources to help with this process and should not wait to assist.
4. Before too much more time passes, there must be an official effort to document the actions of these volunteer groups—specifically, in order to capture successes and what was accomplished with limited resources in a very short period of time. This should include the data architecture created. We could use this as a model of how to design a holistic system on the fly and inside of a dynamic, asymmetric threat environment in a constrained time frame.
5. In the event of a future overseas conflict, the U.S. government could maintain a central database of SIV eligible employees. There could be a requirement for the employing office to upload information verifying employment at the time an employee becomes eligible for SIV.

With these new policies and processes in place, we can reassure our allies, support our veterans, ensure that troops on the ground will be able to receive the support they need from local communities in the future, and—most importantly—avoid another catastrophic withdrawal in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and I look forward to your questions.

¹⁹ See Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-8, § 602(b)(2)(A)(ii), 123 Stat. 524, 807 (2009).